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Disability and the Politics of Nomenclature

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Abstract

This paper argues that issues of contestation around nomenclature are of great significance in struggles and social movements of marginalized groups. The use of nomenclature is a contested terrain as far as the disability rights movement and the politics is concerned, and usages like handicapped, differently abled, divyang and persons with disabilities are heavily loaded with social meanings that can have decisive implications for public policy on disability as well as the larger understanding of the very phenomenon of disability.

Keywords: Disability studies, handicapped, differently abled, divyang, persons with disabilities, politics of disability

Introduction

The question of the correct nomenclature is something that has been a major point of contestation in many of the emancipatory movements of marginalized communities across the world. The movement of racial minorities in the United States of America critiqued and problematized hitherto common usages like negro and nigger as indicative of the oppressive social structures and relations that marginalize and deprive people of colour. Likewise, the movement of the lower caste groups, the formerly untouchable people in India saw serious contestations regarding nomenclature. Dr. BR Ambedkar, the foremost face of the emancipatory movement of deprived castes initially used the term untouchables in a resignified sense and subsequently preferred the term Dalit, rather than the term Harijan, a usage that Mahatma Gandhi had proposed and popularized.

The disability rights movement has been yet another avenue wherein such contestations regarding the correct nomenclature has played out in recent times. Handicapped, differently abled, specially abled, Divyang, disabled, disabled people and person/people with disabilities are some of the major nomenclature that have been used to describe disability. In this paper, I argue that such contestations are no trivial squabbles about terminology. Nomenclature can be heavily loaded. They can be indicative of larger social, cultural and political meanings. Nomenclature can also be indicative of implicit power relations. As such the politics around the nomenclature has to be viewed

in the light of contested meanings, social hierarchies and relations of power.

The Politics of Handicapped

For most of the twentieth century, the preferred term to describe the actual and perceived disadvantages related to physical or cognitive impairments has been 'handicapped'. This term began to be deployed to denote disadvantages faced by individuals in various domains from the eighteenth century onwards. Usages like socially handicapped, economically handicapped and so on became common. By the twentieth century, this term acquired a more specific sense, as indicative of disadvantages of physical impairments (Okrent 2015). As the term was initially popularized in the arena of sports like horse racing to suggest artificially imposed disadvantages, the idea was that physical impairments impose undue disadvantage on the individual.

However, by the 1970s, the usage of the term was being increasingly challenged. This was the result of the emerging disability rights movement finding the term regressive in its implications and offensive in connotations. Many disability rights scholars and activists associated with the social model of disability that was gaining ground at that point turned critiques of the term handicapped. Disability theorists like Mike Oliver argued that the term strengthens negative associations between disability and begging that have historically existed. For Oliver, the term handicapped is rooted in the imagery of a person with a cap in hand that was often associated with people with impairments across modern western civilizations (Oliver 1996). Thus, the term projects the disabled as helpless and incapable, and reduce them to objects of sympathy and charity.

Yet another reason why the disability rights movements has been critical of the term handicapped has been the perceived power relations that the movement wanted to challenge. Up to the emergence of the social model of disability, public policy on disability was the exclusive domain of medical professionals and social workers. The new disability rights movement argued for a radical shift in power relations, suggesting that the disabled people are perfectly capable of taking control of the narrative around a



life with disability. These activist-theorists perceived the term handicapped as a patronizing imposition by the oppressive power structure dominated by social workers and medical professionals. Rejecting the term handicapped therefore was part of the efforts of ensuring the social model idea of self-advocacy and independent living (Okrent 2015).

The Disguise of Difference

As the disability rights movement was growing in stature and as new notions of political correctness were entering mainstream discourses on disability, the search for alternate, politically correct usages also increased. One such usage that has had significant influence is the coinage 'differently abled'. This phrase was popularized initially by the national committee of the Democratic Party of the United States of America. The usage was an attempt to project physical impairment in a positive context. In the sense that even though you are physically impaired, you have some special abilities. The supporters of the phrase believed that it is a more positive and correct usage than handicapped, or the term disabled that was strongly been deployed by the social model led disability rights movement in the United Kingdom.

Despite the apparent positivity and inclusiveness of the phrase, the usage differently abled is deeply problematic and contrary to the objectives of an inclusive politics of disability. As economist and political philosopher Amartya Sen argues, difference is an essential characteristic of human life. We are different in terms of physical attributes. Some are taller than others, the skin colour would vary, extend of physical abilities would vary, the social attributes like language, food habits and dressing style would be different for different people (Sen 2009). A luxury in one cultural context would be an utter social necessity in another. Even among outwardly similarly placed people, there would be instances of drastic differences. The physical requirements of a pregnant woman or a lactating mother would not be same as those of a woman of similar age who is not pregnant or lactating (Sen 2009). Virat Kohli and Cheteshwar Pujara are top class test cricketers, but their batting styles, temperament and range of shots are remarkably different. Donald Trump, Barack Obama, Narendra Modi, Rahul Gandhi or Theresa May. They are all political leaders, but even as political leaders, they are significantly different.

The point of all these is to reiterate that difference is among the most common attributes of human life. As such, to mark out only persons with physical or cognitive impairments as different is

misleading and mischievous. Such stamping of people as different is also hierarchizing. The implicit suggestion seems to be that there are people who are made according to certain acceptable norms, and those who are not within, are to be marked different. The distance from different to deviant is never too far away. As Michel Foucault has articulately mapped it out, the construction of deviance undermines any kind of politics of inclusion (Foucault 2001).

The idea that disability gives someone unique abilities is rather preposterous. A disabled individual might optimise the use of certain senses to adjust for the particular impairment that they live with. As expostulated powerfully by emancipatory disability research paradigm, disability can give an individual a unique vantage point to conceptualize and comprehend the experience of life with disability (Barnes 2004). Whether that stand point is to be considered a privileged position is debatable to say the least. That has to be the subject matter of a different article and as such, I am not taking it any further here. However, what is not arguable is that it is not only disability that can possibly give such a unique experiential vantage point to an individual. As every individual is situated in one or the other context, all such contexts that are unique in themselves, should potentially be the basis of a unique and arguably privileged stand point. Otherwise, such a unique stand point is not the exclusive characteristic of disability as such. Therefore, I would argue that the understanding that physical or cognitive impairment would give individuals unique abilities are rooted more in stereotypes than in any substantive logical or scientific foundations. So, the implications and substance of the phrase 'differently abled' or similar phrases like specially abled have to be considered as contrary to the agenda of social inclusion and social justice despite their apparent intentions being otherwise.

Nothing Divine About It

A term that has gained much currency in official circles and sections of media in India to describe the interlink between impairment and related deprivations is 'divyang'. The term was coined by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his monthly radio broadcast Man Ki Baat in December 2015. Like in the case of 'differently abled', the intentions behind this proposed terminological change need not be doubted much. However, like in the case of the former, the term divyang too is deeply problematic and can be damaging to the agenda of inclusion.



The term has etymological origins in Sanskrit and Hindi and can be loosely translated to English as divine bodied. Notions of divine retribution and divine tests have closely been linked with disability for a long time in history (Braddock and Parish 2000). Many religious beliefs associate disability with past sins. Another strand of thinking considered people with impairment as people closer to god. The idea is that disability is a kind of divine test on people who do not have impairments. As to how they would try and relate to the struggles of the disabled and help such people. Such formulations can only strengthen the marginalization and objectification of people with disabilities.

As has been already argued, disability does not confer a disabled individual with any special or unique abilities. Disabled individuals possess similar kind of abilities and qualities like any other human being. Like in the case of all human beings, these abilities and qualities would vary in degree. There is no added divinity to a disabled body. There are no non-human superlative qualities or abilities.

Yet another problem with terms and phrases like divyang and differently abled is that they are premised on a limited conception of deprivation experienced by persons with impairments. The focus of these terms and phrases is on the individual and limitations or extraordinariness of individual bodies or minds. Such an approach is grounded in a medical approach to these deprivations. However, as articulated by the social model of disability, a significant extend of deprivations experienced by individuals with different kinds of impairments that prevents them from being fully participant members in the life of the community are located outside the body as such. Social and cultural attitudes and physical barriers create most of the deprivations experienced by persons with disabilities. For a visually impaired student aspiring to study in a university, absence of accessible reading material and assistive devices can be a hindrance. Lack of sign language based information, non-availability of tactiled pathways, ramps and accessible lifts, and other similar general lack of accessible design can make it difficult for people with different kinds of disabilities to access the public domain (Shakespeare 2006). Negative stereotypes and ablest social attitudes can deprive individuals with disabilities who are otherwise qualified for legitimate opportunities (Oliver 1996).

Deprivations experienced by persons with impairments are primarily socially created. Instead of focusing on the social creation of disability,

phrases and terms like differently abled or divyang shift the focus to the impaired body and thus individualizes a social problem.

The Functionality of Disability

The discussions so far has established 2 fundamental premises. Firstly, life with disability involves navigating a set of deprivations on a routine basis. Secondly, those deprivations are primarily socially created. Attributing uniqueness or divinity thus is missing the point and is highly euphemistic. The term disability is in my view, is better able to capture the essence of the experience.

Disability does not imply incapability. However, disability is that state of being where an individual with physical or cognitive impairment is unable to perform tasks or achieve goals that are socially valued or valuable. Rather than hiding that reality in verbal fantasies or tautological euphemisms, the term disability facilitates asking the question as to what prevents a person with impairment from being a fully participant member of the society. That question can then enlarge the conception of the causal origins of deprivation experienced by persons with impairments beyond the individual, their bodies and minds. The term disability can point towards disabling social, attitudinal and physical barriers that a person with impairment has to encounter on a routine basis as the primary cause of deprivation. Thus the term is able to shift the focus away from the individual (Oliver 1996). It facilitates the question what disables the individual from being in a desired state of being or being able to do something that is desirable? That is the most important question when it comes to inclusive public policy on disability. Phrases like differently abled or specially abled, or terms like divyang ignore or hide the element of deprivation that is part of the routine life experience with impairment.

Conclusion

As disability theorist Tom Shakespeare argues, life with disability would often involve navigating multiple physical and social challenges. While there is nothing shameful about disability, neither is it a matter of cheer or divinity. There is an element of predicament as far as life with disability is concerned. The descriptive nomenclature thus has to be able to capture this element of predicament. While doing that, the right kind of causal questions needs to be facilitated so that the right kind of inclusive solutions can be worked out.

Before I end this article, I would like to briefly touch upon one last point. The disability rights movement has seen a discussion on whether a person first vocabulary should be adopted in



engaging with disability, as in whether it should be a disabled person or a person with disability. The UK social model has largely preferred the former, while the movement in the US has preferred the latter. My take is that this has to be a context sensitive issue. In most situations, the aspect that the individual is an individual first and anything

else later has to be stressed. However, there could be contexts wherein the socially created deprivations may have to be projected more. So, there cannot be any hard and fast rules on this, it has to be the context that should decide this question.

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